LONG ISLAND / ENVIRONMENT

Northrop Grumman calls state's $585M Bethpage water cleanup plan 'impractical'

The former Northrop Grumman and Navy-owned site in Bethpage was once a hub of aerospace manufacturing on Long Island from the 1930s to 1990s, including work on military aircraft and the Apollo moon lander. Photo Credit: Howard Schnapp

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Northrop Grumman is calling for the state to withdraw its $585 million plan to fully clean up and contain groundwater pollution coming from its former Bethpage site, saying the proposal was "unnecessary, infeasible, and impractical."

In comments submitted to the state last month, the Virginia-based aerospace and defense company said the state's proposal to pump and treat 17.5 million gallons of water per day went against decades of the state's position that stopping the plume and more aggressive cleanup was not necessary to protect public health or the environment.

The company, in its 57-page comment, which also came with more than 1,000 pages of exhibits, said the state failed to consider a more modest, "cost effective" alternative that it pitched. And it said the state's proposal to construct 24 pumping wells connected with miles of piping to treatment plants and recharge basins would cause significant disruption in the community, including increased traffic, congestion and noise.

“While Northrop Grumman appreciates that there may always be a desire to do more,” it wrote in its July 8 public comment, the state proposal “has strayed from scientifically based principles. It is unnecessary and could indeed do more harm than good, leaving the citizens of Bethpage worse off.”

The state plans to respond directly to Northrop Grumman's comments, along with more than 70 comments it received about its proposed cleanup plan, later this year.

The company's opposition, which Newsday learned about this month through a Freedom of Information Law request to the state, drew sharp criticism from local water providers who have accused Northrop Grumman and the Navy of not doing enough to stop and clean up pollution from the 600-acre site. The state declared it a Superfund site in 1983.

"The response was absolutely predictable," said Mike Boufis, superintendent of the Bethpage Water District. "If Northrop Grumman and Grumman would have put as much effort into cleaning up the plume as they did to dispute the DEC plan, we wouldn't be talking about it today."

Stan Carey, superintendent of the Massapequa Water District, which sits in the path of the plume, wrote in an email, "After decades of mismanaging the cleanup of this plume, the water district and our residents have completely lost all confidence in both Northrop Grumman and the Navy to effectively clean up this massive groundwater contamination. The water district is pleased and supports the Governor's commitment and the NYSDEC revised plan to effectively address this issue."

Richard Humann, president and CEO of H2M architects + engineers, Bethpage Water District's longtime consultant, called Northrop Grumman's concerns about the community being disrupted by construction "offensive."

"They created this. They allowed it to become what it is today. For them to take the position it's too disruptive to the community, it implies they care about the community. That's a tough one to swallow," Humann said.

Boufis said, "Bethpage residents are very understanding when at least there's a light at the end of the tunnel for them to see."

State Department of Environmental Conservation officials said their latest plume containment plan followed a $6 million investigation started in 2017 that included 3D computer modeling from the U.S. Geological Survey and analysis of 200,000 groundwater records spanning decades.

The state "has exhaustively investigated the plume using the latest science and technology. We know now that containment and treatment are possible," Department of Environmental Conservation Deputy Commissioner Martin Brand said in a statement Thursday.

Northrop Grumman spokesman Vic Beck said in a statement that the company would work on "fact-based, scientifically sound remediation efforts that advance the cleanup and help protect the community without unnecessary disruption and potential harm."

State officials, including Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, have said that if Northrop Grumman and the Navy won't agree to pay for the more aggressive cleanup plan, the state would move ahead with construction and pursue reimbursement from the responsible polluters later.

The U.S. Navy plans to submit comments to the state "in the next few weeks," according to Navy spokeswoman JC Kreidel.

After decades of complaints from local water districts and elected officials about the state's cleanup plans, the state in May released an aggressive plan to drill 24 extraction wells that would pump and treat a combined 17.5 million gallons of water per day at five treatment plants. It would be the first state plan to stop the spread of the plume and fully remove the contaminants. The state's plan is projected to cost about $240 million in capital costs, and $320 million to operate and maintain over the next 30 years.

Cleanup is projected to take 110 years to fully remove the contaminants from drinking water.

The Bethpage site was a hub of aerospace manufacturing on Long Island from the 1930s to 1990s, including work on military aircraft and the Apollo moon lander. The operations also contaminated soil and groundwater, and the state listed the facilities for cleanup in 1983.

The plume, spreading a foot per day, is now 4.3 miles long, 2.1 miles wide at its widest point and up to 900 feet deep. Considered Long Island's largest groundwater pollution source, it contains at least 24 contaminants, including the solvent trichloroethene, or TCE, a human carcinogen, and the emerging contaminant 1,4-dioxane, a likely carcinogen that can't be removed through traditional treatment methods.

Northrop Grumman cited a litany of ways the state's plan failed to meet state and federal requirements for an updated remediation plan. The company said the existing cleanup, which includes an on-site pumping system run by Northrop Grumman and an off-site treatment system run by the Navy, are sufficient.

"The current, approved remediation strategy and efforts are successfully protecting human health and the environment and having a positive impact on environmental conditions," according to the comments.

Even so, the company had presented the state a more modest but efficient plan to drill three additional containment wells on the edges of the plume, and three more wells to pump and treat areas with higher concentrations of contamination. But the state didn't include it in its list of alternatives. While the company didn't put a price tag on its alternative, it said it "would cost far less" than the state's plan.

The company also said its option would clean up roughly the same amount of contaminants as the state's plan — 96 percent of contaminants within 30 years compared with 98 percent within 30 years under the state's proposal — and was based on more advanced underwater mapping of how the pollution will move.

But, the company said, the state didn't consider that option, as required by state law. It also said the state relied on "insufficient and old data" to justify the more aggressive cleanup plan.

The Northrop Grumman comments pointed to past support from state agencies that found full containment unnecessary and not feasible. Instead, it said that if contamination continues to spread, it could be treated at drinking water wells once it's pumped from the ground, and before it's delivered to taps.

"Wellhead treatment systems are relatively simple to design and install, and routine monitoring by the water districts and New York State Department of Health ensures the continued safety of the treated drinking water," according to the comments.

Water districts have maintained that the pollution should be cleaned up before it reaches drinking water wells, and treatment should only be used as a last resort.

Water providers "operate themselves on pins and needles. Because all it takes is for one system at one plant to fail for them to run the risk of delivering water to the system that does not meet and exceed all standards. And that's every day," Humann said. "The fact that these water districts are great at what they do is not a crutch for Grumman to say, wellhead treatment is the solution."

What's next

The state released a $585 million proposal to clean up groundwater pollution from the former Northrup Grumman and Navy site in Bethpage and stop its spread. During a mandatory public comment period, Northrop Grumman opposed the state's plan and said the state should start again. Here's what's next:

- The state Department of Environmental Conservation expects to formally respond to comments about its recommended cleanup plan later this summer.
- The state then will issue a formal decision on the cleanup plan, known as an Amended Record of Decision. The state could move forward with its preferred proposal, modify it, select another option or start the process over.
- The state then will formally request the Navy and/or Grumman to implement the selected plan. If they do not, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and other state officials have said the state aims to implement the plan, and seek reimbursement for their costs from the polluters.
- The state's report estimated that it will take five years to fully design and implement the plan, and 110 years to fully clean up the pollution plume.

SOURCE: Newsday research

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